Unknown Shibboleth: On the Opacity of Gatekeeping

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Without specifying its meaning or context, openness remains an empty category. It commonly evokes a positive sentiment, but what does it mean to say: We are opening up this or that? And what does it disguise? It even compares with excellence in this respect: a word that is en vogue to be thrown into debates about the future of the academy. It can be claimed, in this sense, that we are excellent in our scholarship if we produce more information, and we are more excellent if this information is open. We are also more democratic if we are open since we share our information. Sharing can also be patronizing if some opaque practice is responsible for its execution and for the institution more generally. It may blind us in seeing our condescension since all we see is our excellence. But then, you cannot have it all. In the end, we are just humble servants to the academic institution, focussed on negotiating knowledge and understanding within our discourse communities. At least we share. But can we do better?

Being within scholarly discourses—or aspiring to be so as a young scholar—may bring with it not only the responsibility of making justified knowledge claims as an authorial speaker. It may also comprise of a responsibility to make the terms on which I and others are able to be an author—and so to be within a discourse community, being heard by an audience that does not hear others—transparent and comprehensible. This may mean that openness needs to be more than mere sharing of information. It means allowing anyone the potential to participate at least in the sense of clarifying the various shibboleths required—in the manifold ways such shibboleths can exist.

Openness as Sharing

We may look at the matter of openness through the lens of accessibility. There are in essence two instances of accessibility in scholarly communication: accessing the results of past discourses and accessing ongoing (or: future) discourses in their making. The former may simply be called sharing; the latter may allude to participation more fundamentally. The former means denying outsiders the , since the sharing of information is claimed to be enough; the latter means making the shibboleth comprehensible.

All too often, the debate on open access focuses sternly on the former. It is in this sense that open access is said to allow anyone to become a knower, to understand the world by accessing the knowledge produced in the closed circles of academic institutions. The tax-payer argument is often invoked. It claims that the people who fund the academic endeavour should at least have access to the produced

information. This is a dubious way of understanding scholarly discourse. It suggests that access to information suffices to enable an individual to become knowledgeable, or even to become an active knower. But the highly specialised scholarly discourses only allow a fraction of the, as it were, plebeian masses to participate even passively in discourse and engage in the complexity of negotiating knowing and understanding. Even the well-versed professor on matters constitutional will not be able to do much with access to scholarly articles on atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease if she arrives with chest pain, cold-sweated, at the hospital. Much rather, of course, it should be her cardiologist—educated so as to understand it—who should be able to access these articles without bureaucratic friction or economic constraint. That is, any cardiologist should be able to get acquainted with the newest information in her area, even though she works at the small, rural hospital without a subscription to *Nature* or *Science*. This should be true irrespective of borders so that the tax-payer argument seems irrelevant in this instance. It should be a matter of solidarity—the ideal of a we-ness that binds us in being human—that we share such information. It is therefore not condescending to claim that only a fraction will be able to grasp the discourse; but this claim must by no means prevent us from sharing. And yet, is this already the potential of openness that is so often being voiced?

The focus on open access, particularly gold open access, has manifested the idea that the change of the way we communicate our knowing and understanding concerns sharing more than anything else. It is a focus on the narrow sense of accessibility. It resulted the stunning efforts of establishing publishing venues alongside funding opportunities and hundreds of open access management staff. It actually changed not much other than immediate access to information. We are seeing this particularly with the rhetoric of transformative agreements, Plan S, or Project DEAL in Germany. These developments require substantial financial investment and a shifting of budgets: millions of Euros (or Pound, Dollar, etc.) are being used to reduce or side-line the use of SciHub or the informal sharing of articles. All along, however, they solidify practices of the making of discourse. In both national and global contexts, openness should have a more fundamental meaning in order to be actually meaningful, lest it be just a solidification of the practices as they existed already decades ago + sharing.

Openness as Participation

If we consider openness to be more fundamental, it needs to be meaningful in the sense of participation, instead of just sharing. Participation should comprise of being able to participate in the making of the discourse, or at least to comprehend its terms.

The *Budapest Declaration*—a milestone on the way towards open access—claims accessibility improves the sharing of ‘the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich’. However, this focus on sharing, its benign notion of publishing better simply by publishing open access, does not much to counter injustices in a global context. Much rather, it constructs a myth of a democratisation of knowledge. Such injustices can appear in different guises. We may find testimonial injustice

which means that groups of scholars are pre-emptively silenced. Especially in the social sciences or humanities there are hermeneutic injustices in that the experiences of some social groups in a collective are not reflected in and through interpretive schemes of that collective, for those social groups do not contribute to the collective's hermeneutical resources. Or epistemic objectification which refers to an exclusion of individuals while they are regarded as objects of epistemic inquiry. With the push of debates of academic imperialism, post-colonialism, and efforts of democratisation, such injustices have come to the discursive forefront in the context of a global production of knowledge. In such a context, the dissemination of North American and European information alongside the Western publishing model needs to be seen critically since non-Western scholars often do not participate. Western discourse practices function as the shibboleth to being able to shape how and what is being known. The case of China is instructive as Chinese scholars were paid a bonus if they published in well-ranked Western journals (instead of contributing to the better ranking of domestic journals).

Power and hegemonic imbalances within the geopolitics of knowledge production thwart the ideals of inclusiveness of a global production of knowledge. Especially in the context of New Public Management and neoliberal agendas, nations are positioned to compete themselves to attract excellent staff, excellent students, and ultimately, foster excellent conditions for a nation's economy to innovate. There is no aim for a global production of knowledge in this context, at least not in the sense of an inclusiveness since excellence requires individual superiority which is exclusive by nature (as opposed to quality). There are only national productions of knowledge then. And they are, of course, in competition with each other so that fostering a constructed excellence nationally becomes a necessity. This can be seen in various contexts, from the UK's Research Excellence Framework to Germany's Exzellenzstrategie, or academia's mode of hyper-competition in the wake of excellence more broadly. It seems only legible for such an agenda to increase a nation's visibility by pushing its dissemination with the means of open sharing—withholding the shibboleth but showcasing one's knowledgeability.

And yet, even within a national context—irrespective of global injustices—openness has a potential beyond the mere sharing of past discourse. Discourse communities have a responsibility for engaging with this potential. This particularly concerns the transparency of the practices through which discourse comes to existence: gatekeeping—the decision-making of being published or not—needs to be open so that it is made comprehensible to all why someone is considered a legitimate participant and someone else is not.

Making the Terms of Participation Transparent

Gatekeeping usually takes place in the form of editorial decision-making, supported by information gathered through peer review. Editors are often not knowledgeable or specialised enough to claim the position to judge on the quality or potential of a

paper (which, of course, does not hinder some to judge anyway). Critics may argue in this instance: why do we need gatekeeping in the first place? Why only make the shibboleth transparent—why not abolish it? All should be able to participate, one may claim; the technological means allow us to facilitate this. You cannot argue against technology, of course. But gatekeeping does not depend on technology. Some sort of filtering seems necessary since a communicative locus needs to concentrate a community—an audience in the sense of a gathering of authors and readers who interact. Dissolving discourse communities would help neither those inside, nor those not allowed in—for there will no longer be a boundary at all. In reality, of course, a community would move on to new shores and find their communicative locus where they can discuss freely among themselves ("freely" in the sense of freed from the intruder who aims to abolish their community). Nevertheless, if we consider participation to be a meaningful communicative practice there is the obligation to at least clarify the terms of being involved in the communication and, thus, a member of this discourse community.

Openness may in the sense mean making transparent why, or why not, a contribution is being published, and who has contributed to the contribution (in the sense of reviewers who become co-authors by suggesting substantial changes). For being an (aspiring) participant in a discourse requires being able to reconstruct its coming to existence as well as the terms on which anyone will be able to contribute. It is in this sense that we need to acknowledge that gatekeeping, particularly what happens during peer review processes, still is a black box. There are manifold manifestations of peer review. It is impossible for outsiders to comprehend what actually takes place. This does not even pertain the notion of the blind review (which is a difficult practice in itself). It suggests that the position of the contributor is not considered—in review shall only be the information to be contributed. We should remain suspicious whether this is really possible, especially in the humanities and social sciences. The difficulty really steps in as the practices remain opaque even after the decision has been made. Does it not seem unjustified as a discourse community to accept that the boundaries of their epistemic negotiation are based on the judgement of unknown judges? Moreover, it is based on an unintelligibility about whether due judgement has taken place, or whether the author simply knew the editor. We may also ask, as many have witnessed: was the rejection of my colleague's paper really based on the lack of clarifying his methodology, or rather because of her unpleasant, provocative argument?

The imprint of *this has been peer-reviewed* is often used as an argument for transparency, while it actually opposes it. It claims that the practice is transparent since it is a rigorous, scholarly judgement of the contribution in the context of the publisher's standards. This is also claimed to indicate to outsiders: if contributions are not accepted, this is because of real standards (and, of course, not because it was a deviant author). This imprint is invading all areas of scholarship, but what it is rarely stated what it really means in praxis. Scholars know all too well what range of reviewing there exists: from the really helpful engagement with one's text to the adversarial one-liner that clearly shows the reviewer has not looked beyond the abstract. Making this practice transparent by publishing reports will only help improve it and strengthen the community, its discourse, and its value for society.

This transparency is an essential meaning of openness that seems existential if we see the potential of openness in participation instead of the mere sharing of information. It means making the shibboleth comprehensible in constant practice, so that anyone can fathom how a discourse community was formed by contributing to it, and what is required of me to make myself heard, too. In the end, allowing anyone—with the potential to justifiably contribute: claimed scholarly standards—being heard—irrespective of symbolic capital or social esteem—marks one of the fundaments of rational discourse. If we do not make use of this openness, we may ask ourselves, what do we have to disguise.
